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ABSTRACT

Analysis of sex and race representation in almost 3000 stories drawn from 77 basal readers in 7 series published between 1980 and 1982 shows that, although minority and female numerical representation has increased, there has been little progress in role models offered. In terms of representation in the labor force, males of all races were overrepresented, while females of all races were underrepresented. The options for role models among men of color (i.e, all groups except whites) and women of all races were found to be excessively narrow and often unrealistic. Older people, one-parent families, and the disabled were all severely underrepresented. (RDN)

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A major study of new basal readers reveals that numerical representation of minorities and females has increased, but there has been little or no progress in role models offered

Basal Readers: Paltry Progress Pervades

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By Gwyneth Britton and Margaret Lumpkin

Basal readers are used in 85-90 per cent of the public school classrooms as the basis for reading instruction in the first eight grades, and their importance is increasing as financial cutbacks force schools to rely more and more on "basic" texts. What do these readers teach children about themselves? About others? About options for their future?

We have been studying basal readers since 1972, looking at their depiction of people of color and women; recently we began to also look at their portrayal of older people, of people with disabilities and of one-parent families. For our sample, we have selected texts on the basis of availability and common usage in the U.S. public schools. In all, we have looked at a total of 17,694 stories[1] or chapters taken from 57 reading and literature series comprising over 681 books published between the years 1958 and 1982.

This article focuses on the more recent materials—a total of 2,972 stories taken from 77 books in seven series published between 1980 and 1982; the series are listed at the end of this article. (A comparison of the books published between 1958 and 1977 and the current books appears on page 5. More detailed information on the earlier texts appeared in our 1977 *Consumer's Guide to Sex, Race, and Career Bias in Public School Textbooks*, as well as in the October, 1977, *Reading Teacher*.)

We formulated analysis procedures in 1972 and have refined them throughout the study. In 1980 we began to include data about older people, people with disabilities and one-parent families. The analyses were completed by one researcher and a trained assistant who has participated in the study since 1972. The consistency of the evaluative procedures has been periodically verified.

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The procedures we have used are definable, objective procedures so that our findings cannot be discounted as a result of our own bias. In addition, the procedures are objective enough to be repeated by others with comparable results. This procedure has been used by other researchers who have examined bias in German and Mexican readers as well as by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, which examined library books for K-12 students.

We began by identifying the major character in each story—the person(s) around whom the plot centered or whose activity was essential to the plot. We categorized the major characters as Male, Female, Male/Female Shown Equally, Other. The first three categories are self-explanatory; the last—Other—was used when a story featured an inanimate object (such as microscopes), an abstract concept (democracy, for example) or groups (stories about people in other countries fall into this category). We determined "racial origin" on the basis of our perceptions of the major character's origin and used these classifications: Anglo, Black, Native American, Asian/Asian American and Hispanic. Occasionally, it was difficult to determine a character's race except to note that a person of color was being portrayed, and in these cases we listed the story in the category of Non-Identifiable Person of Color.

We recorded career options by gender and race, defining them generally as work providing financial support. (As will be noted, this led to the inclusion of some categories that are not usually considered careers—slave, queen and princess among them.) A career was recorded each time one appeared in an illustration or was mentioned in the narrative, with occupation titles taken from the text. Careers were assigned to the following categories: Anglo Male Career, Anglo Female Career, Male of Color Career, Female of Color Career and Neutral Career. "Neutral" careers, increasingly frequent, are those for which no gender is specified; for instance, the narrative might read, "The engineer studied the difficult problem," with neither the illustration nor the context identifying the engineer's gender or race.

Counting Careers

Whenever possible, we recorded a career for major characters and for all others mentioned in the narrative or shown in illustrations. If the same bus driver or scientist appeared several times, a count of "one" was recorded. However, if seven different bus drivers or scientists were shown in the same story, the career of bus driver or scientist was recorded seven times. If an illustration showed more than ten people in a particular role, a maximum frequency of ten was recorded. (For example, eighteen warriors in one illustration were recorded as "warriors 10.") The limit of ten was set to prevent the disproportionate representation of one career based on one story or sentence. When an indefinite number of people was referred to—"the waitresses who were serving breakfast," for example—a count of two was assigned. In some cases, no career could be identified for a character. Similarly, animals were not assigned career roles.

While reading texts are not intended

as vocational materials, students are regularly exposed to the occupational biases shown in these texts. Students are required to read from these texts and recognize them as authoritative sources. Often career education is specifically taught from a variety of sources (film, speakers, booklets, etc.), which do not have the authority of a single text. In addition, career education is often not taught until grade 5 or 6, if then. Hartley and Watson both found that by the time they reach age eight, both boys and girls already know what sex does what job![2] No doubt, children also absorb another, similar lesson by that age—what race does what job.

Our findings follow.

In the 1980-82 books, males of all races appear as major characters in 35 per cent of the stories; females of all races appear in 20 per cent. Males and females appear as equals in 20 per cent of the works, with the remaining 25 per cent devoted to subjects defined as "other" (abstract concepts, inanimate objects, etc.). Upon comparing the number of male major characters (35 per cent) with that of females (20 per cent), it is clear that these new basal readers still reflect a sexist bias. They certainly do not reflect reality, in which females are 51.42 per cent of the population.

Of all stories that focus on people in the 1980-82 series, 20 per cent are about people of color. (In reality, people of color are 17 per cent of the U.S. population.) Although people of color seem to be adequately represented in terms of numbers, males appear in 60 per cent of the stories, females in only 40 per cent—still a sexist bias.

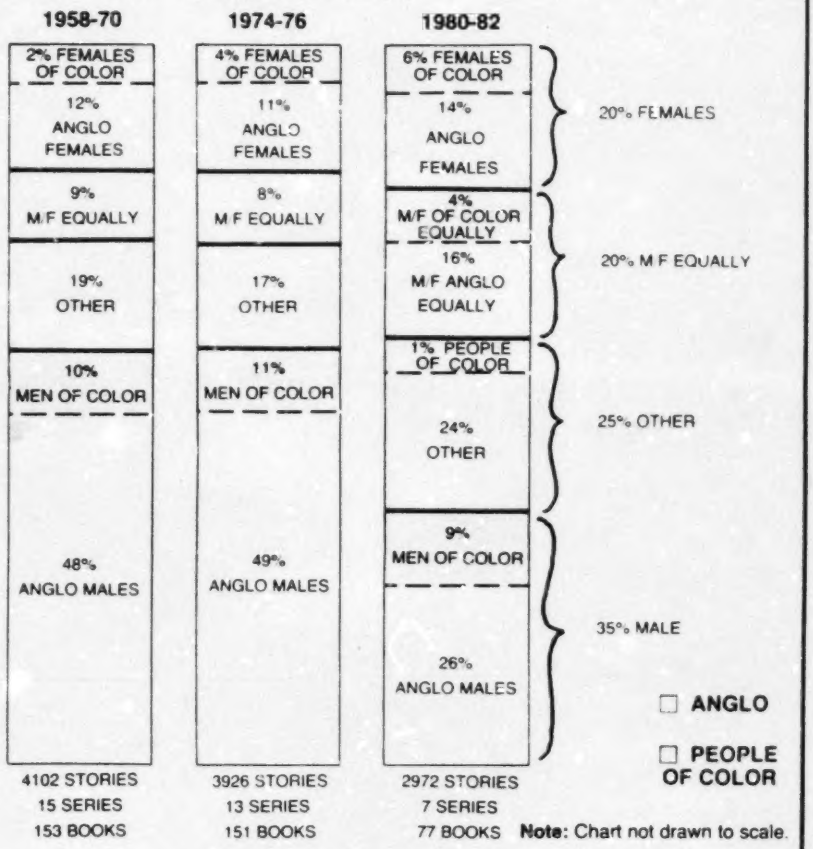
What Role Models Are Depicted?

One of our study's most provocative findings deals with the role models which provide children with career options. What role models are publishers providing for today's children?

Only a few studies have reported on the effect of the careers depicted in basal reading series. A study by Edward Hall suggests that children do learn about career models from such materials.[3] The 1975 edition of *Dick and Jane as Victims* discussed the stereotypic models for skills, trades and professions in children's readers, and concluded that both boys and girls are consistently being "sold" sex-stereotyped information.[4] Our study indicates that these new reading texts continue to severely limit young readers' choices and career aspirations,

Table 1: Major Characters by Gender and Race

The charts below show the breakdown of major characters by gender and race in basal reading series during three time periods: 1958-70, 1974-76 and 1980-82. The total number of stories analyzed was 17,694.



Note: Chart not drawn to scale.

How do the new books compare to earlier series? As indicated in Table 1, the proportion of major character roles for females of all races has risen from 14 per cent in 1958-70 to 20 per cent in 1980-82, a gain that is still far from reality—women are 51.42 per cent of the U.S. population. The representation of minority women has risen from 2 per cent to 6 per cent of all females depicted, but still does not reflect reality, which is closer to 9 per cent.

The representation of males, however, shows a different pattern. The percentage of males increased from 58 per cent in 1958-70 to 60 per cent in 1974-76. After the publication of guidelines on sexism, male major characters decreased—from 60 per cent in 1974-76 to 35 per cent in 1980-82. The ratio of male major characters to female major characters has decreased from 4 males to 1 female to 1.75 to 1.

The percentage of males of color has been irregular during the different time periods, ranging from 10 per cent to 11 per cent and finally to 9 per cent in 1980-82. Females of color as major characters have increased—from 2 per cent to 6 per cent in 1980-82. The overall ratio of minority males to minority females has changed from 5 males to 1 female in 1958-70 to 1.5 to 1 in the 1980-82 era.

The category of Other, which includes inanimate objects, abstract concepts and cultural groups, increased from 19 per cent in 1958-70 to 25 per cent in 1980-82.

Males/Females Shown Equally for all races has risen from 9 per cent of the stories in 1958-70 to 20 per cent in 1980-82, a very encouraging trend. (It is interesting to note that many stories from earlier editions reappear in current books with the addition of a female in a male story or a male changed to a female character; for example, in one tale two brothers became a brother and sister.)

Table 2: Ten-Year Comparison of the Top Six Ranked Careers According to Gender and Race

1972-73 BASAL READING SERIES (1,864 Stories)*

ANGLO MALE		ETHNIC MALE		ANGLO FEMALE		ETHNIC FEMALE	
Soldier	75	Warrior	97	Mother	435	Mother	84
Farmer	66	Laborer	21	Teacher	80	Librarian	13
Police Officer	62	Hunter	20	Librarian	23	Singer	5
Sailor	61	Fisher	15	Queen	14	Teacher	3
King	54	Pearl Diver	13	Nurse	11	Weaver	2
Scientist	40	Musician	13	Maid	11	Chemist	2
						Diver	2

1980-82 BASAL READING SERIES (2,843 stories)**

ANGLO MALE		ETHNIC MALE		ANGLO FEMALE		ETHNIC FEMALE	
Soldier	155	Worker	56	Mother	367	Mother	187
Farmer	102	Farmer	39	Teacher	78	Teacher	23
Doctor	89	Warrior	21	Queen	37	Slave	19
Police Officer	77	Doctor	19	Author	25	Worker	16
King	76	Indian Chief	18	Princess	17	Potter	9
Scientist	72	Hunter	15	Factory Worker	16	Artist	9

* Allyn and Bacon Sheldon Reading Series, Pacing Edition 1973 (1-6)
Economy Keys to Reading 1972 (1-8)
Ginn Reading 360 1973 (1-8)
Harper & Row Design for Reading 1972 (1-8)
Holt Basic Reading System 1973 (1-6)

** Addison-Wesley Reading Program 1982 (1-6)
Ginn Reading Program 1982 (1-8)
Ginn Reading Program, Rainbow 1980 (7-8)
Houghton Mifflin Reading Program 1981 (1-8)
Macmillan Series r 1980 (1-8)
Lippincott Basic Reading Series 1981 (1-6)
Scott, Foresman Reading 1981 (1-8)

being particularly stereotypic when it comes to options for people of color and females of all races.

When looking at the seven 1980-82 basal reading series, vast differences between the options portrayed for the sexes and races emerge. Of a total of 5,501 careers depicted, 64 per cent (3,538 careers) were attributed to Anglo males, while 14 per cent (746) of the careers were attributed to Anglo females. This is a ratio of 4.7 Anglo male careers for each Anglo female career. (We did not include full-time stay-at-home mothers as a career in this portion of the analysis because the U.S. Census Bureau does not recognize that category.) Males of color provided 17 per cent (926) of the career roles, while females of color provided 5 per cent (291) of the career roles (again, we excluded the full-time stay-at-home mothers). For people of color, three male careers are shown for each female career.

The 1981 U.S. Census Bureau defines the labor force as the civilian labor force plus the military. Of the total labor force, 51 per cent are Anglo males, 36 per cent Anglo females, 7 per cent males of color and 6 per cent females of color. In these basal readers, Anglo males appear in 64 per cent of the career examples, a 13 per cent *over*representation. At the same time, careers for Anglo females are grossly *under*represented. Instead of appearing as a realistic 36 per cent of the labor force (a percentage that is increasing), Anglo women are shown as only 14 per cent of the labor force.

People of Color in Labor Force

Instead of a realistic minority male labor force of 6 per cent, textbooks show such workers as 17 per cent of the total—an *over*representation of 11 per cent. Women of color, like Anglo women, are also *under*represented.

Neutral career roles comprise some 493 of the examples (approximately 8 per cent). The increasing number of gender-free roles may be due to the demands by feminists for fuller representations, but given the disproportionate number of male models in these books—and societal sexism—it is possible that children will perceive neutral references as male.

The nature of the career breakdown by sex and race is also of interest. As indicated on Table 2, the "careers" shown most frequently for Anglo males are, in descending order, soldier (155 examples), farmer (102), doctor (89), police officer (77), king (76) and scientist (72). This is an interesting mix of militaristic, authoritarian and unrealistic options.

Even though "soldier" was the most common career shown for Anglo males, few contemporary military careers were shown; most were historical—the cavalry chasing "Indians," colonial soldiers, revolutionary and Civil War battles, etc. The Houghton Mifflin series shows the largest number of military careers for Anglo males with stories being introduced at the third grade level and continuing through grade eight. Although almost 10 per cent of the military is female, these books do not show women in the military, although four series had stories about an Anglo woman

astronaut (cosmonaut, aquanaut or space settler).

The common role models shown for males of color differ from those of whites. They are worker (56 examples), farmer (39), warrior (21), "Indian chief" (18) and hunter (15). While farmer and doctor appear on both lists, it is significant to note that worker—which does not even appear as one of the frequent possibilities for whites—is the career most often shown for males of color. In addition, two careers—warrior and hunter—are hardly contemporary choices, nor is "Indian chief" a viable career for most children of color.[5]

The Census Bureau reports that Black and Hispanic enlisted men increased from 18.5 per cent in 1972 to over 30 per cent in 1980 (9 per cent of officers), yet soldier was not one of the five most common careers for minority males in the 1980-82 series. There were no minority male soldiers in half the series, and Black males were depicted more often as slaves and servants than as soldiers.

The most frequently shown possibilities for white women are mother (367 examples), teacher (78), queen (37), author (25), princess (17) and factory worker (16). These new books thus suggest the same old traditional, low-paying options—plus a heavy dose of royal job opportunities. For females of color, the choices are mother (187 examples), teacher (23), slave (19), worker (16), potter (9) and artist (9).

For information on how these books compare to earlier editions, see Table 2.

Monitoring Other Groups

Our current study also monitored the depiction of three other groups—disabled people, older people and one-parent families (Table 3).

In these series, individuals with disabilities are shown in 2 per cent of the stories (70), and many of these stories feature children with disabilities. Given that 10.5 per cent of all children ages three to twenty-five are disabled and that 17.2 per cent of the labor force between the ages of eighteen and forty-four is comprised of disabled workers, people with disabilities are greatly underrepresented (see Table 3).

Older people appear in 2 per cent (67) of the stories, although they actually number 21 per cent of the population (9.6 per cent between the ages of fifty-five and sixty-four, and 11.3 per cent older, according to the Census Bureau). In addition, the older people depicted are not achievers; they are shown walking in parks, rocking in chairs, being cranky and scolding young children.

Table 3: Disabled, Older and One-Parent Families in 1980-82 Basal Reading Series

	1980-82 Basal Reading Series	1980 U.S. Census Bureau
Disabled	2% (n = 70)	10.5%
Age 55 and Older	2% (n = 67)	21.0%
One-Parent Families	< 1% (n = 22)	20.0%

Total number of stories: 2,972

An even more striking underrepresentation is that of the one-parent family. Textbooks portray such families in only 22 of 2,843 stories (less than 1 per cent). Some series have few, if any, one-parent families. In reality, 20 per cent—one of five children under eighteen in this country—live in such households. Moreover, it is predicted that nearly half (48 per cent) of the children born in 1980 will live in one-parent families at some time before they are eighteen years old.

Basal reading series have a special place in the socialization of children: They are officially approved instruments used in compulsory schooling at a critical period of development. They portray society's approved role models, career choices and the gender and race behaviors considered appropriate. They are a major source of both overt and subliminal conditioning of children, and the messages students are given at such an impressionable age are unrealistic, undemocratic and uninspiring. Images that limit options by race or sex must become unacceptable in textbooks. Otherwise, basal readers will continue to be straight jackets that limit individual development and preparation for life. □

CURRENT READING SERIES ANALYZED

Addison-Wesley Reading Program, Grades 1-6, 1982, Addison-Wesley.

Ginn Reading Program, Grades 1-8, 1982, Ginn (A Xerox Publishing Group Company).

Ginn Reading Program, Grades 7-8, 1980, Rainbow Edition, Ginn (A Xerox Publishing Group Company).

Houghton Mifflin Reading Program, Grades 1-8, 1981, Houghton Mifflin.

Lippincott Basic Reading, Grades 1-6, 1981, Harper & Row.

Macmillan Series r, Grades 1-8, 1980 (Macmillan Series r, 1983, is substantially the same as the 1980 edition), Macmillan.

Scott, Foresman Reading, Grades 1-8, 1981, Scott, Foresman.

NOTES

[1]Plays, skill concept chapters and fact-sheet stories were counted as stories. Poetry was not analyzed.

[2]Hartley, Ruth. "Sex Role Pressures and the Socialization of the Male Child." *Psychological Reports*, 1959, V. 457, p. 268. Watson, Goodwin. "Psychological Aspects of Sex Roles." *Social Psychology: Issues and Insights*. 1966, p. 427.

[3]Hall, Edward. *The Silent Language*, Doubleday, 1959.

[4]Women on Words and Images, *Dick and Jane as Victims*, Princeton, N.J., 1975.

[5]The terms "warrior" and "soldier" were taken from the texts. It would seem that the distinction between the two is based primarily on color: whites, usually in Euro-American dress, are "soldiers"; people of color, usually in traditional dress, are "warriors."

About the Authors

GWYNETH BRITTON is a Professor of Reading Education at Oregon State University; MARGARET LUMPKIN is a Professor of Educational Foundations at the same institution. Since 1972, Drs. Britton and Lumpkin have collaborated on research and writing efforts dealing with race and sex equity issues, readability of reading textbooks, readability of standardized tests, and language simplifications as a Civil Rights concern.